

# Community Workers, Dairy Farmer Join In Food Discussion

**DAVE LEFEVER**  
Lancaster Farming Staff

**STATE COLLEGE** (Centre Co.) — Hank Herrera has a simple goal. He wants to see a small percentage of the food supply in his neighborhood come from local farms, with local people in control of processing and distributing it.

Herrera spoke on a panel recently at the annual conference of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA). Joining Herrera on the panel were Kim Seeley of Milky Way Farms, a grass-based dairy and bottling operation in Bradford County, and Ken Regal, director of Just Harvest, a community group that works on hunger issues in the state.

"Community Food Security — Who Is in Charge of the Food Supply?" was the theme of the discussion.

Herrera, a planner with the NorthEast Neighborhood Alliance, works in a low-income neighborhood in the city of Rochester, N.Y. His concern with food issues there grew when the local supermarket closed, and residents were left without a nearby, secure source of food. Herrera worked to help bring a family-run supermarket chain into the area, which eventually resulted in the return of a number of food outlets into the city.

Herrera created a charter school in the area for teaching about local food systems. Through this initiative, the group began to "use food production

and distribution as an economic development engine," he said. The alliance is "democratic and very resident-driven." As Herrera put it, "I work for the neighborhood."

The most important thing the alliance learned, he said, is that Rochester and the 15 rural counties surrounding it have a combined population of 1.46 million people who spend nearly \$4 billion a year on food. That comes out to about \$2,500 per person.

"Food is the biggest sector of our economy, bar none," Herrera said.

The 15-county area surrounding Rochester includes 10,000 farms — with enough land to potentially supply 75 percent of the food supply to the population, according to Herrera. He estimated this model could increase per-farm income by \$200,000 per year.

But the idea is not an easy sell, especially to producers. "The problem is convincing our farmers," according to Herrera. The community-based food network also needs "master chefs to create local cuisines that excite people."

"We have to become masterful at preparing food our way," he said.

Herrera and the NorthEast Neighborhood Alliance have been at work developing farm markets that sell food from local farms. His goal is for this rural-urban alliance to grow to the point where it is self-sustaining.

The short-term goal is for local farmers, processors, and retailers

to get "a couple million dollars" of the \$4 billion share — a fraction of one percent — that the region spends on food.

Panelist and PASA board member Kim Seeley runs a dairy grazing and milk-processing business in partnership with his family on Milky Way Farms. At 40 years, the bottling operation is one of the oldest in Pennsylvania.

According to Seeley, a top priority in creating secure, local food systems should be supporting farmers who are already producing food in sustainable ways.

"We need to work really hard to save the farms that are doing what we believe in," he said.

Seeley gave examples of food processing companies and retailers taking increasing control of the food system in ways that are costly to both farmers and consumers.

"We've had more meat recalls in the last 24 months than we've had in the past 24 years," Seeley said.

He also gave an example of how a major milk processor is now making "butter blend" that consists of 50 percent vegetable oil. This product is mostly used in restaurants and institutions where consumers don't see the label, Seeley said.

Food coloring is added to most butters to create a uniform product appearance — a practice that is so common that it has become the "industry standard" and is not required to be listed on labels, according to Seeley.

Seeley brought along samples

of store-bought butter and butter produced from grass-fed cows on his farm. He asked the audience which sample they thought contained added food-coloring.

Most of the group wrongly picked the deep-yellow stick of butter, when it is actually butter whitened by food coloring has become the industry standard, Seeley said. His point was that some foods contain unlisted ingredients.

"We need to come up with our own definition of pure food," he said.

For conventional dairy farmers who want to begin direct-marketing their products, the first step

should be changing the way they farm, according to Seeley. They need to develop a "unique product" such as cheese, ice cream, and milk from grass-fed cows.

"Fluid milk is the most stressful (to market directly)," he said. For that reason, dairy farmers should start by selling products with long shelf life, such as cheese.

Ken Regal, Pittsburgh, has worked with community food issues for the past 20 years.

"Real security is not just about the bountifulness of supply," Regal said, pointing out that community involvement, food quality, local control, and culture are all part of the puzzle.



From left, Kim Seeley, dairy farmer; Ken Regal, director of Just Harvest; and Hank Herrera of the NorthEast Neighborhood Alliance discuss food security at the recent PASA conference.

## PMMB To Conduct Hearing On Price Issues

**HARRISBURG** (Dauphin Co.) — The Pennsylvania Milk Marketing Board (PMMB) has scheduled a March 5 hearing for all Pennsylvania milk marketing areas.

The purpose of the hearing is to receive testimony and exhibits to consider increases in minimum wholesale prices, container costs, and the Class I over-order premium because of rising fuel and resin costs.

Persons wishing to testify at the hearing must file with the PMMB on or before Feb. 24 at 4 p.m.

The PMMB filing address is: Milk Marketing Board, Room 110, Agriculture Building, 2301 North Cameron Street, Harrisburg, PA 17110.

The hearing will take place at 9 a.m. in Room 202 of the Agriculture Building.

## Central Susquehanna Valley Beef Meeting Set

**NEW COLUMBIA** (Union Co.) — The annual Central Susquehanna Valley beef producers winter educational meeting will take place Thursday, Feb. 27 at 7 p.m. at the Bonanza Restaurant near New Columbia. Those who want to eat at the restaurant can join the group at 5:30 p.m. for supper.

Guest speakers for the meeting

will be Dr. Harold Harpster and Dr. Michael O'Connor, both from the Department of Dairy and Animal Science at Penn State.

Harpster will speak on packaging, storing, and feeding systems for forages to reduce wintering costs for beef cattle in Pennsylvania. O'Connor will speak on new developments in estrus synchronization for cattle.

Persons who would like to eat with the group need to call Dave Hartman at the Penn State Extension office in Columbia County at (570) 784-6660 or e-mail [HYPRLIN@psu.edu](mailto:HYPRLIN@psu.edu) or [dwh2@psu.edu](mailto:dwh2@psu.edu) to register.

The Bonanza Restaurant is located at the New Columbia exit of Rt. 15 just south of interstate 80.

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